

RollPlay



GM NOTEBOOK  
ISSUE EIGHTEEN

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# 1

## Welcome, Patrons!

More often than just about anything else - more than “what program do you use for RollPlay” or “have you played [INSERT GAME NAME HERE]” the question I’m asked most often is “where do you get inspiration for [CAMPAIGN]” and while I love talking about the stuff that gets my brain going, I don’t think I’ve ever really sat down and made an exhaustive list for any given campaign. There are bits and pieces of things, here and there, that come to the fore as part of a larger conversation but no lists. So here you go - we’ll touch on my major inspirations for Nebula Jazz and Court of Swords, and I’ll share what’s exciting me about sci-fi right now for the new, unnamed Stars Without Number campaign. Of course, the thing about inspiration is that it’s always shifting, that new exciting stuff keeps coming up and moving me in different directions, so while today this list is up to date, who knows what neat stuff I’ll discover for the campaigns tomorrow?

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 18 of the GM’s Notebook.

**Adam Koebel**  
**RollPlay GM**



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# Court of Swords



Court of Swords is an interesting thing, because when I started thinking of ideas and concepts for the campaign, I wanted to do something new. Not just something to Roll-Play but something I'd personally never seen before in the D&D space. Dungeons and Dragons is built on a long lineage of really good fantasy inspiration - the original Appendix N in AD&D basically lays out every place Gary and Dave stole from to make the game. Chainmail went through some relatively severe litigation before Hobbits became Halflings. Even now, that same lineage is seen in things like the Witcher or Game of Thrones

but when we decided to do a D&D campaign, I wanted something different. I didn't want the same fantasy we'd seen over and over, so I went looking for some new mythologies. New to me, and maybe new to D&D but certainly inspired by other things, some real - names, concepts and elements of Southeast Asia and Buddhism - and some more mysterious. Of course, so much of my exposure to that part of the world, as someone from North America, is filtered through a powerful and complicated conflict, still fresh in the modern memory. Trying to understand that, and see past it to a place that's more than

where America went to war while still doing justice to that concept of the space was part of my original goal. Here are some things that have inspired Court of Swords along the way.

## **The Windup Girl (Novel)**

A sci-fi novel, set in a semi post-apocalyptic Thailand, this is a story about the soul, in many ways - who is granted permission to have one and who isn't. It's a story about foreign power in a place where it has meddled before, and the vagaries of that meddling. It's also the place I first learned about the term "farang" and the colonialism and response thereto in the novel have informed me about some choices and ideas for some similarly-named visitors to the Courts. It's a fantastic novel, and paints with these broad colorful brushes.

## **Samsara (Movie)**

Samsara has some of the lushest imagery of jungles and southeast asian temples I've ever seen. It's not a film with any narrative, exactly - there's music and movement and color but it feels more like walking through a strange dream than watching a movie. Visually stunning, and something I've called back to many times throughout the campaign.

## **Full Metal Jacket (Movie)**

What's interesting is that this film's connection to Vietnam-the-place is less informative to me as part of a campaign inspiration for

Court of Swords than it is about the second act's influence as Vietnam-as-conflict. The company of soldiers feels like an adventuring party of the worst sort - there with some mysterious outside authority in foreign territory with a willingness to murder to get whatever they want and next to no supervision. It's a chilling story however you look at it, but thinking about it as campaign-gone-wrong, I like to imagine the way massively-armed, unstable individuals like adventurers might be seen by the world at large.

## **Exalted (RPG)**

Despite being better known for Vampire: the Masquerade or other World of Darkness games, Exalted is, to me, the magnum opus of White Wolf's work. Originally intended as a sort of mythopoetic origin story for that world, the setting of Creation is one of my absolute favourites, and has inspired bits and pieces of so much of the world of Court of Swords. From the human-but-alien gods to coloring my impression and understanding of reincarnation, to the magistracy of the courts, lots of aspects of Exalted have made their way into our D&D campaign. It's a stellar world with terrible, terrible rules, but absolutely worth a look if you can score a copy from a used game store or read the PDFs. First edition is almost universally better than 2nd across the board - start with the core rules if you're interested, and see how the world develops from there.

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## Swan Song



We joke all the time about how other companies are stealing our ideas, on Nebula Jazz. That this new Marvel movie or that new comic book feels like it's pulling characters, situations or locations directly from our campaign. It's a funny joke not because it's even remotely possible, but because we're all drawing from the same well. The specific kind of satirical, silly, heartfelt and ribald sci-fi that makes up Nebula Jazz is everywhere, and in every iteration, authors and creators pull from this unnameable source of weird tropes. Most of the time, when I create something for a roleplaying campaign that's inspired by something else I make an effort to redevelop, repurpose or at the very least

obfuscate the source I'm drawing from. Less so, Nebula Jazz, in which we shamelessly tear characters from other sources, throw some antennae on them and go to town. It's something that makes it work, I think, in a sort of Mad Magazine way. Here's some of the big stuff that inspires Nebula Jazz to the Olympian heights of goofiness we seem to reach, some weeks.

### **Guardians of the Galaxy (Movie)**

Obviously the first Guardians of the Galaxy movie is, tonally, our touchstone. It's the thing that inspired the direction the campaign went in the first place, and the sort of

cosmopolitan cinematic circus that makes up the universe of that movie is a really big inspiration for me. It's also got this fantastic balance of earnest and silly - takes itself the right amount of serious at the right moments and also knows when to wink at the audience like "see, we know what this is all about, we know what you like". It's also incredibly good at integrating music in a way that feels both inside and outside the universe, which was hugely inspiring. We're in a funny place where I can't actually play the songs I want in my soundtrack, because copyright is a thing and we're not Disney and can't license Michael Jackson songs for our premiere episode, but I can tell you what songs to listen to, and you can imagine them, right?

## Music (Music)

Like Guardians, music is hugely important to the way I conceptualize Nebula Jazz. Most of the time, when I think about an episode (either beforehand, in prep or after the fact) there's some tune or another stuck in my head as a result. I specifically set up the universe to have a 1980s culture fetish so that the cast could look to it as a source of inspiration themselves - song lyrics we're all familiar with make excellent Aspects, as you can convey a hell of a lot in a single sentence. If my character has an Aspect called "The Man In Black" and you're a Johnny Cash fan, you know a hell of a lot about that character, don't you?

Eighties pop is the first and biggest inspiration, musically, but I've tried to weave genre threads throughout in other directions, too. The show is called Nebula Jazz, of course, as homage to the freewheeling and sometimes-chaotic sprawl of horns, keys and drums that make up that genre. I listened

to a lot of weird and classic jazz in the early prep days, and I always found it to be a limbering mental exercise. Many of the factions or even individual characters in the game have had their own themes or genres tied to them. The lounge-Elvis jams of the Jacker Hackers are a big one and every A'garan is named after a Black Metal musician or album (for what takes itself more seriously than that darkest and bleakest of heavy metal subgenres?) I've never played a game with music so integral to my idea and understanding of it, and I hope that's come across in the game to you as an audience.

## Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (Novel)

Most of the time, we try to aim for Douglas Adams even when we're more often a bad episode of Pigs in Space. Which isn't to say the Muppet Show wasn't fantastic satire, or that aiming to be one thing and ending up something else isn't a grand mistake. Much of the time, it's more reasonable to call Hitchhiker's Guide an aspiration, rather than an inspiration. The novelist has the luxury of time, of an editor, of the release of a finished thing when it is finished. I think we do okay given the improvisational nature of things. I'd like to think that Douglas Adams might find Nebula Jazz amusing, even if not particularly up to his standards. Douglas Adams loved alien dick jokes, right?

## My Players (Other Humans)

Nothing is more surprising or inspiring to this campaign than the people I play with. Not merely their own informing of the narrative's inspiration via the kinds of sci-fi they enjoy but them as people, what will make them laugh, what'll inspire them in turn. There's

a really wonderful feedback loop where, through our characters, much of the time we're exerting effort just to make each other laugh. I know that when Sam and I get into a dry, english goof or when I can make Dodger throw up her hands in desperate, earnest astonishment, I've done right by the show. In

the same way, Nebula Jazz has been an exercise in letting go - in allowing the players to light the game on fire in a way I've never had the opportunity to, before. They're my biggest inspiration, and I think they'd say the same for each other, if asked.



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# As-Yet Unnamed Stars Without Number Campaign

A new campaign is a fertile ground. There's no part of a campaign like the planning phase. Every time I move from the theoretical space of "maybe I'll get to play this" to actually building the game and developing a cogent set of themes around it, I get so excited. Voracious for content, wanting to devour movies, books, music, tv shows and comics just to get my head in the right space. My imagination is a hungry thing, and I feed it with stuff that I feel is going to synthesize the kind of creative energy I'm looking for when I go to make my own content. Right now, this campaign is in a very early stage, and is bound (happily) to

shift and move as the cast is firmed up but I like having something to do to them with, a kind of fetal premise, unformed but full of potential. Ready to grow into the full campaign. Here are the ghosts that have been haunting my brain for this upcoming game. You'll notice they're all novels - mostly my sci-fi is literary; I drew on a lot of movies and tv shows for *Swan Song*, and I think this time my brain is leaning more towards Frank Herbert and less toward Ridley Scott.

## **Dune (Novel)**

Speaking of Frank Herbert. This is among my favourite books, genre or otherwise,

and it blends the high-fantasy of noble houses and mystical societies with a firmly grounded understanding of locale and environment into a deeply political ecological epic. It's a wonderful book, and the story of Atreides vs. Harkonnen is one that has always resonated with me. For this campaign, I want to move away from the scrappy lived-in proletarian universe of say, Firefly, and take a step up and out - broaden our horizons into something bigger. Something that feels at once personal and universal.

## **The Culture Series (Novels)**

If we're going to be expanding the scope of our sci-fi out and upward, there's no better place to look than this series to answer the questions of what the highest limits of what might be possible look like. The Culture is a high science fiction series (think TL 6) where the idea of a galactic empire isn't about planet-killing weapons but an all-encompassing hegemony and what it would be like to exist in a universe with such an overwhelming power. The series

**The year is 3200. Humanity is scattered like dust among the stars. The broken relics of a former day litter the sky and men and women struggle to rebuild the glory of humanity's lost golden age.**

**– Stars Without Number Rulebook**

I've always loved Dune's connection to our Earth as well, though for Stars Without Number, the divide is one of distance rather than time, but the idea that 10,000 years in the future we'll be quoting a version of the Bible is deeply amusing and interesting to me. I hope to harness the gravity of Herbert's work in this new campaign.

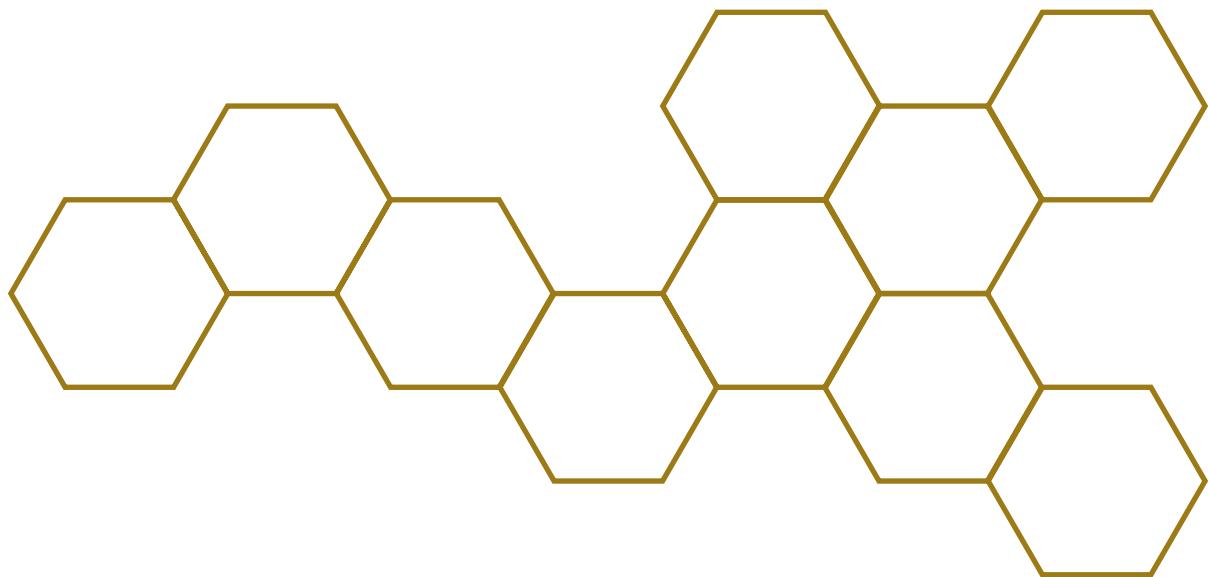
asks questions about what it means to be human, who decides that moniker and whence the source of true power. I want there to be something culture-esque in my universe, even if it's merely a remnant of something that came before.

## The Quantum Thief (Novel)

At times surreal, this is a story with a narrow focus and a big technology. There's SO much inspiring me about this novel, which I've read several times but what I'm really into right now is a faction called The Zoku, a hyper evolved gaming guild turned enclave. If I do transhumanism in this campaign, I'm going to do it the way the Quantum Thief does.

## The Collapsing Empire (Novel)

Dune with a sense of humor. The Collapsing Empire took Scalzi from a writer I was so-so about to someone whose next novel can't come fast enough. I love everything about this book, but what I love most is the sense of humor it has and the way the characters feel so utterly human and vulnerable and weird. They're perfect NPCs, and more than anything that's what I want to capture. Please read this novel, it's so good.



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# Mirrorshades GM Notes Commentary

## Possible Jobs

It was a bit strange running two campaigns with fundamentally the same premise - a bunch of weirdos doing jobs for organizations bigger than themselves. Funnier still that they both developed their own plot that moved them away from that. You can see in both the early stages of this and Swan Song my need to prepare more than I would ever really use. That's a combination of my lack of experience with the space (and combatting that lack of experience with prep) and the getting-our-foothing feelings that almost always come with a new campaign. Better to have more options than fewer, and sometimes even the discarded ideas make their way back into the game. Especially missions which can be modular and re-used.

What's fun is to look at these and wonder where the game would have gone if we'd done a different mission? The first one is obviously a kind of reference to any "spies on a boat" type mission - a classic of the espionage genre. It's the beginning of Metal Gear Solid 2, or that bit from the start of Winter Soldier. Boats and the hijacking thereof, especially in the rain, are a classic but how noir is this idea and how out of place for what we'd eventually come to see Mirrorshades become.

I can't include the mafia seriously in a cyberpunk game without my mind doing a full-stop hard right into Snow Crash territory. For me, the two go so firmly together that I would never have been able to keep this from becoming an homage to Uncle Enzo. Pizza delivery hitmen abound. We did eventually see

a variation of the Deliverator but we'd have been all about it a lot earlier if we'd gone down this route.

Mission four ultimately became a big part of the shenanigans in Tokyo, so there's a bit of reuse going on there, which is nice. Mission five is just typical Shadowrun GM bullshit. "Too bad, the package you just spent all mission protecting blows up good job idiots." It's pretty much the opening plot of Final Fantasy IV but a bomb instead of, wait, that package was full of Bombs wasn't it?

## Hadiyah

I love Hadiyah, and it was interesting watching audience reactions to her. She was a pastiche of a lot of politically charged women I was seeing in the media at the time, plus a Shadowrun spin. Shadowrun has always been a political game, because cyberpunk is a political genre. I always loved that about it, even when it was taking weird missteps and doing that "orcs are an analogy for black people" thing that fantasy does sometimes. I felt like Hadiyah, human is poli-

club and the whole idea of protest and equality at the center of a mission was so important to giving my players the tone of Shadowrun first hand. The fact that she and Crusher would become close was really touching, for me. I loved how the players became attached to her the way they did. I don't remember ever having to use her stat block for any real purpose, but that's the thing about a game like Shadowrun, you don't make the stats and you'll find yourself needing them. Sometimes it's better to have and not need than need and not have spent the time to put the notes together.

Someone gave me a drawing of Hadiyah, once. It was really simple and cute and was labelled Hadiyah, the Jellybean Queen because of a short scene i'd basically forgotten where Hadiyah ate some jellybeans in a hotel room. The things that affect people. It was so sweet. I'll always have a fond memory of this character, because of that.

## Mirrorshades: S61 E02

Possible Jobs:

- ① Smuggle drugs (legitimate, experimental Zeta-Interferon) from Seattle to Victoria (Salish-Shidhe). Mr. Johnson is a Hospital Director in the Salish-Shidhe Gov't. Opposition is SS marine patrol. Complication is weather (fog / storms) The Salish-Shidhe have shamans on hand + regular type defenses. (10,000\$)
- ② A Courier mission of some sensitive blackmail material from the Mafia to a corporate dropoff (Cross Applied Technology) in Sacramento. Johnson is a Mafia don. Complications are TIR highway patrols and Cal Free State raiders. (8000 + expenses)
- ③ Bodyguard duty for a magician with enemies, who have pissed off the ~~Mertyns~~<sup>Humanists</sup>. One week, between arrival at SEA-TAC, a talk at the University of Washington and back. (800\$ / day plus expenses)
- ④ Shiawase needs to send a message to a shareholder - they want his home trashed and him frightened into selling his stock. Target sees it coming, has hired bodyguards (another runner team). (Pay is 4000\$)
- ⑤ "Courier mission": Nova Gaia wants a package delivered to Ares R+D scientist working on some chemical weapon. Package is a bomb. Sucks. (5000\$)

Job: Protect Hadiyah al-Fulan (an Ork magician and scholar from the Arcanology department at MIT) while she lectures, does outreach work and attends to business in Seattle. Hadiyah is a controversial figure in the magical world, who is known for her activism in the magical world. Particularly, she is working to increase awareness that metahumans are a huge part of the Awakening and that they make up a significant percentage of all magic users. She has made several enemies this way, among Human Supremacist groups primarily. The runners will have to contend with protests, threats and ultimately, an attempt on Hadiyah's life.

Hadiyah al-Fulan: An MIT trained Magician and cultural critic, born in Montreal. Polarizing and popular on the Matrix, she is a smart, tough young woman. Hadiyah knows she has enemies and is cautious, but brave.

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She wears a hijab and suit when in public, replacing the suit with a t-shirt and jeans when she is alone or resting. She is half-Arabic, half caucasian, and as an Ork is tall, tusked + muscular.

BOD: 6 QUL: 3 STR: 4  
CHA: 5 INT: 4 WIL: 5  
ESS: 6 MAG: 6 REA: 3

Allergies: Allergic to Silver, Sewer

Ph:	L	M	S			D
M:	L	M	S			D

Skills: Enchantment 3, Magical Theory 5, Sorcery 5  
Conjuring 5, Etiquette (Academic) 4

Spells: Heal Moderate Wounds 4, Detect Enemies 3, Entertainment 4, Stimulation 3, Barrier 3

Astral: 12 Defense: 0 Dodge: 3 Magic: 5

